

PREACHING FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION
IN AN URBAN CONTEXT

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In Partial Fulfillment
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by
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Abstract

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by

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Probably considered one of the most controversial books in the Christian Bible, the book of Revelation has posed a challenge to those who preach. Many have trouble trying to harmonize its themes and understand its symbols. This project is an analysis of the book in an attempt to develop a sound hermeneutic for preaching it for the urban church today.

Chapter 1 gives a background of the book in relation to its original purpose and theme. John, the author of the book, expresses a great desire to reveal Jesus Christ and His involvement in the history--present and future--of humankind.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 serve as a way of analyzing the book of Revelation from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective as a model and a process for interpretation. From various authors and approaches the content of the book is examined for characteristics that might aid in understanding its meaning as apocalyptic literature.

Chapter 5 explores the symbolism of the book to establish a hermeneutic for its understanding. It is widely understood that in order to properly interpret and preach

the book of Revelation the preacher has to gain an understanding of its symbols and imagery. The old statement says, "a picture is worth a thousand words." This is very true with the book of Revelation.

Chapters 6 and 7 look at the Book of Revelation with regards to worship and preaching. With the focal point of the book on the worship and praise of the "Lamb" and the centrality of preaching in the Christian worship, the book of Revelation provides significant material for the Christian pulpit.

Chapters 8 and 9 attempt to look at a contemporary application of the book of Revelation within the context of the urban situation. In these chapters, the book of Revelation is used as a theological basis for preaching and community action.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Scope and Limitations

I intend to explore the book of Revelation in order to establish a content for preaching. I feel that it is important to establish sound hermeneutics for studying any document or book of the Bible. Because of the nature of this particular book, it is even more important to have sound principles of interpretation in order to develop good sermons that will address the needs of the urban city. I will consider the themes of hope, comfort and deliverance which are so dominate in the book of Revelation and so needed in our society today.

I do not intend to exhaust the book of Revelation for its many shades of meaning or theological controversy. It is also not my intent to develop another commentary on the book or discuss each of its chapters in detail. I will only discuss those texts that will aid in developing the ideal of preaching as focal to the communication of the Gospel to the many hurting souls in today's churches and communities. This is where the promises of God's grace needs to be heard, felt and realized.

Definitions of Terms

Apocalyptic is adventus: the coming of the future. By nature it is revolutionary. It sees the battle between corporate good and evil and projects its resolution in the total destruction of the old world of evil and the complete replacement of the new Kingdom of God.¹

Eschatology is the last things of earth's history and the ushering in of God's judgment and of the apocalyptic kingdom as these are portrayed in the book of Revelation.²

Hermeneutics is a science of determining certain principles for discovering the meaning of a document. These principles are not a mere list of rules but bear organic connection to each other.³

Numerology as used in the book of Revelation has significant meaning. It represents value as it relates to character or quality rather than quantity. For example, 7 means complete or perfection; 12, 24, and 1200 mean foundation as in the 12 tribes of Israel, or people of God. Numbers are also used in Revelation's literary form and parallels such as the trinity of God and the trilogy of

¹ Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. eds., Preaching Through the Apocalypse: Sermons from Revelation (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1992), 2.

² Kenneth A. Strand, Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis (Naples, Fla: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1976), 10.

³ Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 11.

evil; the 7 series as in the seven churches, seals, trumpets, bowls.⁴

Symbol signifies any description which is intended to represent something other than what it normally, commonly, or usually designates or depicts.⁵

Linear Narrative of the Book of Revelation

In general, apocalyptic literature, and specifically the Book of Revelation, looks at the world with a wide view. It is concerned with the activity that is simultaneously going on in heaven and on earth. This is seen clearly in the complex structure of the book. Cornish Rogers confirms this observation. "It is difficult to assess the time sequences; time appears to be both vertical and horizontal, swinging on an axis. One must read the book with a wide-angle lens; or more aptly, with a split-screen lens."⁶

The Apocalypse sees the big picture as terminal and the judgments of God inevitable. Though the individual is important, the indictment and corporate sin evokes the final judgment and wrath of God. Sin and the drama of its challenge and eradication moves like an AC-DC current wave,

⁴ Jon Paulien, "Interpreting the Symbolism," in Symposium on Revelation: Book I, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md: Biblical Institute, 1992), 81.

⁵ Strand, Interpreting the Book of Revelation, 25.

⁶ Rogers and Jeter, 6.

beginning in heaven, then moving to earth, and back to heaven and again to earth.⁷

There is an extensive use of symbols, dreams and visions where various kinds of images both negative and positive color the meaning of the text.⁸

A summary of the book's structure will give evidence of the theme and purpose of the author. I will use Cornish Rogers' structure as a basis for this summary, with some divergence.

In chapter 1, the vision of Christ by John of Patmos reveals God communicating with humanity. There is an urgent desire to reveal His will to the earth because time is short.⁹

Chapters 2 and 3 represent pastoral letters to the seven churches in Asia. The letters contain analyses of the conditions of the churches, indictments of sin, and hope and grace for the overcomers.¹⁰

Chapters 4 and 5 reveal God's ongoing work of salvation. The Lamb motif is introduced as the source of divine power as a result of the crucifixion. Power through

⁷ James McCray, "Preaching the Promises," Lecture presented at the School of Theology at Claremont, Calif., 3 Jan. 1992.

⁸ Rogers and Jeter, 7.

⁹ Ibid. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

His sacrifice on Calvary is the antidote to the onslaught of sin.¹¹

In chapters 6-16, the cycles of seven seals, trumpets, mystic signs and bowls are revealed. These cycles seem to be inter-related and the thread of warning is a major theme.¹²

In chapters 17-19, the demise of corporate evil is predicted. The fall of Babylon is the final blow to systemic corruption, injustice, and apostasy.¹³

In chapter 20, the thousand-year reign and the last judgment take place. The righteous seem to be enjoying a period of peace which erupts into the final battle between God and Satan. God is the victor; Satan and sin are destroyed, and righteousness and justice reign.¹⁴

In chapters 21 and 22, New Jerusalem is seen coming down from heaven in an inaugural descent and the kingdom of God is established forever. The righteous' long-awaited reward is conferred and unbroken peace is restored.¹⁵

Work Previously Done in the Field

In the area of exegesis and biblical commentary from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective, Uriah Smith has developed

¹¹ Kenneth A. Strand, "The Eight Basic Visions," in Symposium on Revelation: Book I, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 36-37.

¹² Rogers and Jeter, 6.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

an excellent commentary called The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation.¹⁶ This work in apocalyptic literature seeks to examine the meaning and application of Revelation in light of history and anticipated eschatology. This is indeed one of the earliest commentaries among S.D.A. scholars which has contributed to further study and interest in prophecy in the church.

For Smith, the Revelation is more than just a catalog of events and dates, but reveals a divine purpose in the redemption of the human race. He assumes an historical interpretation of the book which sees certain portions of it as fulfilled with the remaining portion accomplished at the close of earth's history and the beginning of the eternal kingdom of God.

Troubling Biblical Waters by Cain Hope Felder is a comprehensive look at the significance of the Bible in the black community.¹⁷ It addresses the issues of race, class, and family in the Bible. Felder examines closely the relationship of the Bible to the African-American and its political, religious, and cultural implications.

In Eugene H. Peterson's book, Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination, he views

¹⁶ Uriah Smith, The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1944).

¹⁷ Cain Hope Felder, Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989).

Revelation as the "last word" on the Bible and human destiny.¹⁸ He sees the book as having the ability to help the Christian maintain his spiritual dimension while at the same time resist world evils. His observation concerning worship as the inevitable response to the throne of God is on target. Because the throne of God is central to the Christian, worship must be central to the life of the believer.

Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective is Allan A. Boesak's attempt to find in the book of Revelation ground for comfort and inspiration for the oppressed South African people while at the same time challenging them and the world to endure the struggle for freedom and justice.¹⁹ Boesak's hermeneutic is contemporary historical which sees the fulfillment of prophecy occurring at different times and in different ways in the history of the world. This means that the reoccurrence of oppression, injustice, tyranny, etc. are opposed in all ages by the message of the Revelation. As life goes on, God's word is the eternal conscience of justice, duty, and promise.

¹⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishing, 1988).

¹⁹ Allan A. Boesak, Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

Symposium on Revelation: Book I and II²⁰ edited by Frank B. Holbrook is a compilation of studies by various scholars in the Seventh-day Adventist church on interpreting the book of Revelation. The work focuses on developing a hermeneutic for interpreting the book from a historicist recapitulation approach.

Kenneth A. Strand's Interpreting the Book of Revelation is a literary analysis of the Revelation from an Adventist author. Strand considers the essential elements for hermeneutics for the Revelation. His chiastic structure of the Revelation is unique.

Preaching through the Apocalypse edited by Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, is a book of sermons illustrating various approaches used by several authors in preaching the book of Revelation. This work serves as a homiletical model for sermon development in using the Revelation as a text.

The Last Word by C. Raymond Holmes is an eschatological theology of preaching that has as its central text the book of Revelation.²¹ Holmes sees the mandate for the contemporary preacher to preach God's last day message as seen through the Revelation. He sees the crisis of the last

²⁰ Frank B. Holbrook, ed., Symposium on Revelation: Book I and II (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992).

²¹ C. Raymond Holmes, The Last Word: An Eschatological Theology of Preaching (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1987).

days addressed by the gospel of the Revelation as the last word for the world and the messenger.

Sing a New Song: Worship Renewal for Adventists Today, also by Holmes, is a study in worship renewal for the Seventh-day Adventist church today.²² Holmes sees the pulpit as central to adventist worship and preaching as focal. For him Revelation 14 identifies the mission of the church and molds the direction of its liturgy.

Exploring the Apocalypse

For the number of years that I have pastored and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, I have always been fascinated and intrigued by the power and potential of the spoken Word. The Bible holds within it the mysteries of God that makes for great drama, suspense and theater. The scriptures portray real life situations like no other book can.

However, there is one biblical book that has always, at the same time, amazed and baffled not only me, but countless millions for generations. This book is known as the book of Revelation. In the Greek language we know it as the Apocalypse, which means, "unveiling."²³ The context suggests that what is hidden is about to be revealed. In

²² C. Raymond Holmes, Sing a New Song: Worship Renewal for Adventists Today, (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1984).

²³ Boesak, introduction, 15.

fact, the record begins with its claim of origin as "a revelation of Jesus Christ"..., "to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass" (Rev. 1:1). It is said by John that this revelation comes through a chain of authority that begins with God who gave it to Jesus, who gave it to the angel, who showed it to John, who wrote it in a book and sent it to the seven churches which are in Asia.

The book is often looked upon as something out of science fiction, filled with symbols and imagery that takes on an other-worldly nature. There are strange looking beasts, parallels, and contrasts that give the book its unique quality.

I intend to show that the themes of the book of Revelation can be effectively preached within the context of the urban situation. I believe that in spite of what seems to be a complex literary style the author of the book is endeavoring to show his readers that even in the midst of trouble, conflict, and strife, God is still in control and hope is alive and well. My aim is to develop a practical way of utilizing this book in the contemporary pulpit for the benefit of addressing the challenges of life where hope seems to be starving for assurance and revival.

I chose the urban situation first, because that is where I minister to hundreds of lives. Also, I have found

that the social, economic, environmental, and political problems there take on a special texture in their impact on the lives of the people. Because of political and social decay that tends to create and foster generation after generation of hopelessness, the inspiration that John gives from a similar perspective of oppression and injustice can breathe new life into the oppressed of today.

Purpose and Theme of the Book of Revelation

There is much debate and speculation as to whether or not the book of Revelation is a Christian book. In fact, some even question its right of inclusion into the canon. However, when looking at the themes of the book, one cannot help but acknowledge its Christian nature.

It is evident from the very first phrase ("the revelation of Jesus Christ") that Revelation is a Christian book. Jesus Christ is present everywhere, both explicitly and in symbol. There are references to churches and to the cross. The careful reader also becomes aware of scores if not hundreds of echoes recalling NT themes, vocabulary, and theology. Although the book has a different style, vocabulary, and subject matter, we should not expect, therefore, its theology to be radically different from what we find elsewhere in the NT.²⁴

The author of the Revelation sets forth the purpose of the book from the very beginning. In the first verse he states that this is "the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show to his servants what must soon take

²⁴ Jon Paulien, "Interpreting Revelation's Symbolism," in Symposium on Revelation: Book I, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 76.

place...." (Rev. 1:1). This reveals that contrary to the beliefs of some, John's book points to events future to John's time. This is made clear in the prologue and the epilogue as follows:

"The theme of the book has to do with the second advent of Christ, and, at the same time He is ever present."²⁵

"Behold, he [Christ] is coming with clouds, and every eye will see him...." "I am the Alpha and Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:7-8).

"Behold, I [Christ] am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:12-13).

Throughout the book, the reader is anchored in the hope of the soon coming of Christ and, at the same time assured that in spite of the trouble that comes, Jesus is with us to give courage and victory. This assurance instills faith to move forward in life meeting the challenges and obstacles that confront us along the way. Cornish Rogers states it plainly:

Revelation is a call to be faithful to God and to be assured that help is on the way through Jesus Christ, the sacrificial conquering lamb, who has become God's instrument in establishing God's reign on earth.

²⁵ Kenneth A. Strand, "Purpose and Theme of Revelation," in Symposium on Revelation: Book I, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 27-28.

The book's intention is not to scare, but to assure that God's justice will be done on behalf of the faithful who suffer because of their faithfulness.²⁶

Time and Authorship of the Book of Revelation

There is great speculation and debate as to the time and authorship of the book. This writer does not intend to explore this debate. However, as a brief statement, according to many early historians and religious persons such as Justyn Martin of Ephesus, Irenaeus of France, Clement of Alexandria, they indicate that the John of Patmos is also the brother of James, Son of Zebadee, and one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. This would also suggest that the book was probably written about A.D. 95.²⁷

²⁶ Rogers and Jeter, 5.

²⁷ C. Mervyn Maxwell, God Cares, vol. 2 (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1985), 63-64.

Chapter 2

The Book of Revelation from a Seventh-day Adventist

Perspective

History and Background

Any exploration into preaching from a book as complex as the Revelation must first have a basis from which a person can develop an understanding and practice for preaching. In looking at ways of using the content of the Revelation, it is helpful to examine a community where the book has had and continues to have significant meaning. One such religious community is the Seventh-day Adventist Church(S.D.A.). For many years the book of Revelation has played a very important part in its development, self-identity, and mission. In fact, much of S.D.A. preaching is bathed in the prophecy and encouragement of the book.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church sees its origin as rising out of prophecy itself. It traces its beginnings during the Millerite movement of the early to mid-nineteenth century. This was a tremendous time of religious awakening and apocalyptic preaching. Much of the popular preaching of that day was taken from the prophecies of the Bible, especially those found in the books of Daniel and Revelation. The preaching of this time was characterized by a renewed interest in the second advent of Christ, personal

holiness, and spiritual growth. The call to get ready for the day of judgment, the eradication of a sinful world, and the restoration of the kingdom of God on earth attracted a lot of attention. "[William] Miller's message was not a lot of fuss about a date. It was the first angel's: the everlasting gospel and the hour of his judgment is come (Rev. 14: 6,7). It was evangelism that sought to help get people ready to meet the Lord."¹

As interest in prophecy continued to increase and the expectation of the imminent return of Christ heightened, greater curiosity and study of the book of Daniel and Revelation followed. Daniel 8 and 9 drew a lot of attention in that pre-Advent movement and early Adventists initially believed that this prophecy pointed to the return of Christ on October 22, 1844. In these passages Daniel says that "Unto two thousand and three hundred days: then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (Dan. 8:14). It was thought at that time that the sanctuary referred to was the earth. This prompted great speculation and the anticipation that Jesus would come at the conclusion of this time prophecy. It was thought that the cleansing of the sanctuary pointed to the Levitical "Day of Atonement" and that the earth would be cleansed of sin some time in the mid 1840s. "Although in

¹ C. Mervyn Maxwell, Tell It to the World (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1976), preface.

the United States there was no major interest in an imminent second advent until a decade after the Albury Park Conferences, there had been speculation on the 2300-year period. As early as 1811 Presbyterian Pastor William C. Davis of South Carolina had calculated the ends of both the 2300 and 1260-year prophecies to occur in 1847."² This understanding was consistent with the calculations that led to the spiritual awakenings in Germany, Rome, England, Scandinavia, and Australia.³ Later, William Hales Snow further refined the date to October 1844.⁴

Understanding the implications of this prophecy drew light on the judgment of Revelation and the call to "Come out of Babylon."⁵ The type of preaching was characterized by evangelical, fire and brimstone, apocalyptic preaching which had as its objective conversion and reform. The context of the time was conducive for preaching from the book of Revelation. The concepts portrayed there took on great significance in the religious experience of the people.

After the disappointment of 1844, Adventists continued to place emphasis on the prophecies of the Revelation. Today, Seventh-day Adventists continue their tradition of

² Schwarz, Light Bearers to the Remnant (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1979), 30.

³ Ibid., 24-30.

⁴ Maxwell, God Cares, 30-31.

⁵ Schwarz, 47.

preaching from the book. Because world conditions are as they are, a constant study of the Revelation takes on greater interest and meaning.

Conditions Making Preaching the Book of
Revelation Meaningful

One might ask why there is a growing interest in preaching from the book of Revelation? This writer sees several possible conditions and reasons for renewed interest in understanding and preaching from the book of Revelation. First, there has been an ongoing curiosity in the prophecy of the Bible. Because the book is written in apocalyptic style, human beings are naturally curious of its meaning. The way in which John cloaked his messages has raised more questions than answers.

Secondly, there are many events that have made today's generation more skeptical. The great natural disasters that have made the headlines of all forms of media. The horrendous inhumanity by human beings and the abuse of the environment has raised questions as to the uncertainty of the future. We live in the age of and under the threat of nuclear annihilation. Few persons can not fathom a sudden and cataclysmic end of life as we know it.⁶

⁶ Rogers and Jeter, introduction.

Thirdly, there is growing concern for the unrest in the Middle East; especially considering the fact that this is the very location where the Revelator describes the last battle where the world will erupt into one great cosmic war. It seems as if the harder people and governments try to bring peace to this region of the world the more violence and destruction escalates. This was further evidenced in the recent Persian Gulf War.⁷

Fourth, we are approaching the end of a century and also a millennium. This unusually creates an environment for prophets of doom and speculation of the coming of the end.⁸

How Seventh-day Adventists Use the Book of Revelation Today

Seventh-day Adventists use the book of Revelation much in the same manner today as they did over 150 years ago. Much of the preaching from the book is done within the context of an evangelistic type service or worship service. The prophecies of the book of Revelation are usually directed at some modern event as evidence of fulfillment of John's visions, and a call to spiritual holiness and reform is common. The basic truth of most of the S.D.A. preachers is that although evil seems to be winning out in the world today, God is in control. Jesus will return and through a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

cataclysmic end the old world of sin, death, and violence will be destroyed and a "New Jerusalem," God's world will be re-established. All across the country and all over the world Adventist preachers hold what are known as Revelation Seminars. The goal is to introduce people to Jesus Christ and to what the church teaches.

Within the context of what the church teaches, they also hope to explain many of the prophecies of the book. They believe that in learning the prophecies, people will come to the understanding that they also point to the Adventist church as the "remnant" church of prophecy.

Chapter 3

Hermeneutical Guidelines for Preaching the Book of
Revelation

When attempting the preaching of the book of Revelation within the context of a community, consideration must be given to the idea of making the message of the book relevant to the needs, concerns, and issues that confront that community. The goal in this case should be on how to make the message transcend John's day to the present? It must make a quantum leap from first century A.D. farm/agricultural life, to complex urban life. It must leave the period of knives, spears, bows, swords and chariots and descend upon the age of automatic weapons, nuclear bombs, stealth bombers, and germ warfare. It must move from pestilence of locust and drought to AIDS, abortion on demand, drug-addicted babies, ethnic cleansing, environmental suicide, and the political corruption of A.D. 100 to the political degeneracy of modern time.

When attempting to approach the task of preaching the Revelation, several questions must be raised. What is it? What does the text say? What does it mean? How does it evolve from one generation to the next?

Common Methods of Interpreting the Book of Revelation

In considering how the book of Revelation can be understood we should first look at some commonly used approaches to interpreting the book. There are basically three major categories: historicism, preterism, and futurism.

Historicism

There are two basic approaches to this method: straight-line or recapitulation. The "straight-line" approach sees Revelation portraying a sequence of events that begins in the Apostolic Era and continues on step by step until the grand eschatological climax. The "recapitulation" approach interprets the various visions in Revelation as going over the same ground from the prophet's own day until the end-time. This latter method of interpretation has served as the standard for Seventh-day Adventists. In both cases it is believed that the prophecies meet their fulfillment in historical time between the days of John and the establishment of the eternal kingdom.¹

Preterism

On the other hand however, preterism tends to interpret either the entire book of Revelation or most of it as ancient history. As Strand suggests: Most preterist

¹ Kenneth A. Strand, "Interpretation Approaches to Revelation," in Symposium on Revelation: Book I, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 4-5.

scholars look upon the prophecies of the Apocalypse as reflecting events and conditions relating to the Christian church and Roman Empire in the first century--possibly reaching also a short while beyond that time to embrace things anticipated by John the revelator. There are also a few expositions of preterism that would allow prophecies of the book of Revelation to reach as far as Constantine the Great in the early fourth century, with the section from 19:11 onward possibly reaching its fulfilment in a later period that is still future in our own day to the end of time.²

Futurism

The futurist method of interpretation sees the fulfillment of most of Revelation restricted to a short period of time still future to our own day.

Strand states that there are sub-groups of this method: A subclass of futurism--one into which most futurists and even most evangelicals fall--is that of pretribulationism/dispensationalism. This particular approach normally interprets Rev. 4:1-19:10 as occurring in a seven-year period still future to us--a period beginning with a "secret" rapture and marked at its close by the glorious visible appearing of Christ. The pretribulationists/ dispensationa-

² Ibid., 5.

lists consider this seven-year period as the seventieth week of years of the prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27, although the sixty-ninth week concluded in the early Christian Era.³

Faithfulness to the Text

In getting started a good homiletician will seek first of all to be true to the text. This is true when preaching from any book of the Bible. In order to do this appropriately the reader and preacher must understand the literary material with which they are working. The preceeding commentary gives us various perspectives in looking at the book of Revelation, however, this section deals with understanding what the text is saying. In other words, what does the text say through its own literary world. What did the writer mean when he wrote it? What did the reader of the day understand the writer to mean?

This becomes extremely important to our understanding the textual content of the book of Revelation. Because of its apocalyptic nature, it becomes exegetically tempting to take the shortcut of reading one's own biases and opinions into the text. This writer believes that the best way of understanding the text is to allow the text to speak for itself. This means that the preacher must attempt to see the text through the eyes of the first and second century

³ Ibid., 5-6.

reader. The social, cultural and political context of John the Revelator becomes important to understanding the original meaning of the text. To get behind the eyes, ears and mouth of John helps us gain insight into what he was trying to say and the issues he was addressing.

Most Seventh-day Adventists firmly believe that Scripture are not of private interpretation but that "holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:20-21). This fact of divine inspiration assures that the Holy Scriptures are totally reliable and true. It leads to the conclusion that Scripture is its own best interpreter.⁴

Bible passages, however, must not be put together in a random, undisciplined manner. As Strand asserts, a sound approach takes into account the following facts. First, the Scriptures are not only truth in an overall sense, but also contain many individual truths. Secondly, in dealing with any Scripture passage it is important to ascertain precisely what that particular passage treats and what its own specific message is in its own specific context. Thirdly, whereas bringing together two or more Bible passages having relevance for the same topic will illumine our understanding of the divine truth that is involved, combining fallaciously

⁴ Strand, "Interpretation Approaches to Revelation," 8.

two or more items that are absolutely true in themselves
may very well lead to a synthesis that is wholly unsound and
erroneous.⁵

⁵ Ibid., 9.

Chapter 4

Principals for Apocalyptic Interpretation

Impact of Literary Form

Significant wieght should be given to the literary form the of text. The Bible writers have employed a great variety of literary styles in order to convey the divine message. It should be recognized that the expression truth through a particular literary form displays the characteristics of that form and is understood only when due consideration is given to those characteristics.¹

There are differences in the prose and poetry. For most readers, the difference between prose and poetry is most recognizable. For instance, in the prose account of the Exodus we are told that God sent "a strong east wind" to drive back the waters of the sea (Exod. 14:21). In the poetic account the statement is made that "at the blast of thy [God's] nostrils the waters piled up" (Exod. 15:8).²

The figurativeness of the poetic expression is obvious. Most readers would not visualize God as actually getting down on hands and knees and snorting through His nostrils at the waters of the sea! And yet, that picturesque description adds legitimate emphasis and effectiveness in

¹ Kenneth A. Strand, "Special Rules for Apocalyptic Interpretation," in Symposium on Revelation: Book I, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 11.

² Ibid.

setting forth a divine truth when it is read properly as the figurative language that it is.³

There are biblical parrallels to John's apocalypse. Strand finds this true as he indicates:

The book of Revelation represents a type of literature and style unique among the books of the New Testament. Its closest Bible parallel is the Old Testament book of Daniel. These two Bible books generally are classified as "apocalyptic prophecy," in contrast to "classical prophecy" (sometimes called "general prophecy"), the latter being represented by such books as the major and minor prophets.⁴

He goes on to say:

Both kinds of prophetic literature teach divine truth, as do all the other kinds of literature in the Bible. But just as in the case of the other literary types, the characteristics peculiar to this kind of literature must be taken into account by the student. Unfortunately, the distinction between classical and apocalyptic prophecy is frequently blurred by Bible expositors.⁵

In the paragraphs to follow, we will first note briefly some of the more generally recognized characteristics of apocalyptic.

Features of Apocalyptic Literature

Various authors have pointed out features common to the genre of literature known as apocalyptic. The following list is based largely on the book Interpreting the Book of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid.

Revelation, and in should be considered representative.⁶

Striking Contrasts

Apocalyptic prophecy makes a clear distinction between good and evil, between God's forces and Satan's forces, between the righteous and the wicked, between salvation for God's children and doom for their enemies. Among the numerous striking opposites in the book of Revelation are the seal of God and the mark of the beast, the faithful and true witness and the serpent that deceives the world, the virgin of Revelation 12 and the harlot of Revelation 17, the armies of heaven and the armies of earth, the fruit of the tree of life and the wine of the fury of God's wrath, the New Jerusalem in glorious splendor and Babylon in flaming destruction, and the sea of glass and the lake of fire.⁷

Cosmic Sweep

Classical or general prophecy deals with the present situation as its primary focus, with a certain degree of broadening to depict a final great day of the Lord. Apocalyptic has instead, the element of cosmic sweep or universal scope. Apocalyptic prophecy approaches the great controversy between good and evil not within a local and contemporary historical framework (such as depicted in the messages of the major and minor prophets), but from the

⁶ Strand, Interpreting the Book of Revelation, 18-20.

⁷ Ibid., 18

vantage point that draws aside the curtain, as it were, on the entire world for the whole span of human history.⁸

Eschatological Emphasis

At times the general prophets broaden the scope of the doom oracles or "day-of-the-Lord judgments" to portray briefly a final judgment at the end of earth's history. However, the situation of their own day is the usual context and focus of their writing.⁹

By contrast apocalyptic prophecy, although it treats history down through the stream of time, has a particular focus on the end-time events. The author is concerned with what will be the outcome of the struggle. "Apocalyptic describes an ongoing struggle between good and evil in history, a history that tends to degenerate as it proceeds in time, But it is a history that is actually moving toward an end at which time God Himself will directly intervene to destroy evil and establish righteousness."¹⁰

According to Strand, we may say that the general prophets looked upon history from the standpoint of their own position in time, whereas the apocalyptic prophets envisage a sweep of history with a special focus on history's eventual climax.¹¹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹¹ Ibid.

Origin in Times of Distress and Perplexity

Apocalyptic prophecy appears to arise out of times of great trouble for God's people.

In its historical setting, biblical apocalyptic such as Daniel and Revelation arose in times of distress, perplexity, and persecution. Thus, it appears that apocalyptic prophecy emerges when dire circumstances for God's people might well lead them to question whether God is still active and in control. And it teaches clearly and forcefully that God is indeed still the Master of history, that He is with His people, and that He will fully vindicate them at a grand and glorious eschatological climax of the end of the world. Apocalyptic prophecy is a kind of literature that is particularly suited to give comfort and hope to oppressed and downtrodden servants of God in their time of critical need for precisely such comfort and hope.¹²

Basis in Visions and Dreams

It is obvious that when comparing apocalyptic prophecy with classical prophecy and other biblical literature indication is that in apocalyptic there is an abundance of references to visions and dreams. Also, the appearance of angels to interpret such visions and dreams is not uncommon.¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Chapter 5

Symbols and Imagery in the Book of Revelation

Extensive Use of Symbolism

Although classical prophecy uses symbolism to some degree, apocalyptic may be distinguished by it. The book of Revelation is permeated with symbols of various sorts. Its imagery is particularly rich.

Use of Composite Symbolism

The classical prophets tend use symbolism that follow true-to-life patterns. This is different in apocalyptic in that apocalyptic literature often departs from conventional forms. Strand provides some examples to consider "It depicts, for example, animals that are nonexistent in nature, such as the seven-headed dragon and the sea beast of Revelation, the winged lion and the four-headed leopard of Daniel, etc. Composite symbolism was common, of course, in the art and literature of the ancient Near East."¹

In summary, Stand says;

Although classification on the basis of such criteria has been called into question, most scholars still give weight to these elements as being basic characteristics of apocalyptic prophecy. In any event, the simple fact is that there is a body of ancient literature that manifests to a greater or lesser degree most of these elements. Therefore, for descriptive and utilitarian purposes a classification on the basis of them seems both useful and warranted. Knowing and understanding such special characteristics

¹ Stand, "Special Rules for Apocalyptic Interpretation", 14.

of apocalyptic is, of course, a first step in proper interpretation.²

He goes on to say:

It should be noted too, that all the characteristics set forth above are not necessarily completely unique to apocalyptic. The extent to which they appear and the manner in which they are used in apocalyptic is, however, quite distinctive and serves to provide a significant contrast to the dynamic evidenced in classical prophecy.³

Symbolism in the Book of Revelation

Symbolism is a fact of life in apocalyptic literature.

Strand sites this:

As noted earlier, among the general characteristics of apocalyptic prophecy is its extensive use of symbolism, especially composite symbolism. The book of Revelation is filled with symbolism and imagery, a fact that causes much consternation and confusion to interpreters. Part of the problem is that modern expositors frequently interject their own meanings onto the symbols, rather than determining the scriptural range of meaning.⁴

As one surveys the Revelation, it becomes evident that the vast majority of its allusions in symbolism and imagery are to the Old Testament.⁵

Symbolism's Literary Role

A valid rule of Scripture interpretation is that a given passage should be interpreted literally unless there is evidence of symbolic or figurative language present. For

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kenneth A. Strand, "Symbolism in Revelation," in Symposium on Revelation: Book I, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 22.

⁵ Ibid.

most biblical literature this principle works well, but the difficulty comes when interpreting apocalyptic prophecy. In doing so we must recognize in this kind of literature a preponderance of symbolic usage. Thus, some modification in our approach may be necessary. It may have to be turned around somewhat so as to find reasons for a literal interpretation of many passages.⁶

In any case, there are specific considerations we should keep in mind when we ask why is there so much symbolism in apocalyptic prophecy and, what are some guidelines to determine when to expect symbolic usage? Aside from the fact that symbolism is a basic characteristic of this kind of literature, Strand provides the following reasons.

1. Effective portrayal. A symbol is often the most convenient or forceful way to portray a message. "A picture can replace a thousand words," and frequently does more accurately and effectively than a prolonged verbal description.⁷

In the case of apocalyptic literature, which depicts the great struggle between good and evil, the use of symbol and imagery should be expected. Issues of cosmic scope could not be set forth effectively by literal expression. Here is a case where human inability to understand the

⁶ Ibid., 22-23.

⁷ Ibid.

complexities of the moral controversy gives reason for the use of symbols.

2. Portrayal of the future. Future history itself would be a phenomenon difficult to describe literally, but symbolic descriptions best portray to the reader and hearer the future.⁸

3. Common pool symbols. Another explanation for the use of symbolism is the fact that certain symbolic expressions were a part of Israel's vocabulary, a pool of common symbolic usage.⁹

Symbolism's Fluidity

By its very nature, symbols are fluid. They are word pictures. Descriptions of images and concepts of the writer imagination. Some characteristics of this fluidity may be noted.

1. The same symbol may signify different things in different contexts. For example, the lion may be used to refer to Christ (Lion of Judah in Rev. 5:5), to the devil ("roaring lion" in 1 Pet. 5:8), to Judah ("lion's whelp" in Gen. 49:9), and to Assyria and Babylon ("lions" in Jer. 50:17).¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

2. Different symbols may represent the same thing.

For instance, both lion and lamb represent Christ in Revelation 5.¹¹

3. There may be a variation of symbols depicting the same thing within the very same context. For example, Christ is portrayed as both the shepherd and the door into the sheepfold in John 10; the seven heads of the beast of Revelation 17 are declared to be both seven mountains and seven kings.¹²

4. Details may vary in what are apparently the same symbols. For example, the four living creatures in Ezekiel 1 form the background for the throne scene of Revelation 4. In the former passage each creature has four faces, whereas in the latter passage each creature has only one face. But the descriptions of the faces are the same in both instances.¹³

The modern Western reader may want exactness and consistency when it comes to the use of symbols, but because of the nature of symbolism this is rarely the case. When the fluid nature of symbols is understood, as illustrated above, variations and variables should not trouble us. In

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 24.

¹³ Ibid.

fact, this fluid nature of symbols should itself be a deterrent to us against overliteralness in interpretation.¹⁴

Stand cautions the departure from conventional usage of symbols:

It is important, nevertheless, that we stay within the bounds of the conventional usage of symbols. When interpreting any particular symbol in the book of Revelation, for example, we must think in terms of the range of conventional meanings. Then we do our interpretation on the basis of a meaning that harmonizes with the specific context in the Apocalypse.¹⁵

Symbolism's Inner Reality

One reason symbols are fluid is that they portray an inner reality that functions beyond the significance of the specific item or items that serve as their source. Strand quoting Paul Minear explains this function as follows:

This is a comprehensive rather than a disjunctive mode of seeing and thinking. It apprehends events in terms of their inner structure as responses to God's action. God's action in each epoch induced a recognizable pattern of reactions, and the prophet sought to discern that pattern for the sake of his readers. Egypt remained a distinctive name but it conveyed a symbolic richness of meaning neither limited by the original context nor scornful of it. Behind this mode of viewing was a distinctive ontological stance, to which we should give more attention than we usually do.¹⁶

Examples of this dynamic can be easily supplied in the book of Revelation. In fact, it would not be amiss to state

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Paul S. Minear, Symposium on Revelation, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), quoted in Strand, "Symbolism in Revelation," 24.

that this represents the basic manner in which symbolism functions within the Apocalypse. For example:

1. The symbols of the "two witnesses" (Rev. 11) have backgrounds from Zechariah 4 and from Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, and other prophets.¹⁷

2. In the central portion of the book of Revelation (8:2-18:24) lies a double portrayal of what might be called the "Exodus-from-Egypt"/"Fall of-Babylon" motif. The first five trumpets have as their background source the plagues on ancient Egypt, whereas with the sixth trumpet the scene shifts for background to the River Euphrates, the river of Babylon (9:14). Likewise, the first five plagues are again based on the plagues on Egypt; whereas with the sixth plague the scene again changes to the River Euphrates (16:12).¹⁸

3. What might be termed a "Fall-of-Babylon"/"Elijah-on-Mt. Carmel" motif occurs in the sixth plague (16:12-16).

Here Old Testament backgrounds provide a reality for the Christian community that surpasses the original meanings. We note two aspects of interest.

1. God's constant care for His people of earlier times continues with the Christian community for whom Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb. 13:8).

¹⁷ Strand, "Symposium on Revelation" 25.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The concept is inherent in the affirmation of our Lord's being the Alpha and Omega (Rev. 1:8; 22:13).¹⁹

2. The Christian church represents a heightening of all that God had done for His people in the past. Not only is this community in the line of faith, it represents a culmination of God's purposes and plans for His people. In summarizing Strand notes:

Hence, all the meaningful experiences in the history of God's dealing with His chosen people in the Old Testament can illustrate, at least to a point, the experience that may be expected by Christians. And Christian experience, as just noted, will transcend those original experiences or events upon which the symbolic representations are based. From the foregoing discussion we see that symbolic backgrounds are often merged or blended. This blending of symbolism for the imagery of Revelation is, indeed, characteristic of the book. Hence, we emphasize again that in each case the original meanings of the background materials have not been destroyed. Neither is there a denial or minimization of the historical events or situations alluded to in the imagery. Rather, this blending of the symbolic backgrounds depicts a new reality that transcends any individual background, or even the combination of backgrounds, so that the whole exceeds the sum of the parts.²⁰

Suggestions for Interpreting Symbolism in the
Book of Revelation

As a matter of convenience we supply the following list of suggestions for interpreting symbols in Revelation. This list is not comprehensive; moreover, the interpreter should not use it rigidly, but should consider it a suggestive

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 25-26.

guide for the reader confronted by the vast and puzzling usage of symbolic language in the Apocalypse. The following list is taken from Kenneth Strand's book, Interpreting the Book of Revelation:²¹

1. Understand the symbol for what it is: a figure or sign that is fluid and representative in nature.
2. Recognize the reasons for using the symbol in the particular passage and context under study.
3. Discover as far as possible the source(s) of the symbolism, noting the original meaning and any derived meanings for the community now using it.
4. Consider the symbol from the standpoint of the kind of literature where it occurs (apocalyptic for the book of Revelation, a literature that is characterized by a cosmic eschatological emphasis, striking contrasts, etc.).
5. Note the relationship of the symbol to the main theme being treated. For instance, the message of any one of the seven trumpets must be compatible with the broader theme of the entire seven-trumpets vision.
6. Consider the symbol within its immediate literary context or textual setting. There must be compatibility at this level too.

²¹ This list is almost verbatim from Strand, 29.

7. Interpret the symbol in relationship to its conventional usage. Its precise meaning (within the range of its conventional usage) is to be determined by the theme being treated and in harmony with the immediate textual setting—the principles enunciated in numbers 5 and 6 above.

8. When looking for the historical application, take care not to "tailor make" history to fit preconceived ideas of what the application of the message should be; rather, let the message itself be the guide to the historical fulfillment.

9. Do not seek to find an application for every detail of an extended symbolism; instead, get the main picture or lesson. Parts of symbolic presentations often simply round out the picture.

10. Recognize that the extent of a symbolic presentation may vary from a simple metaphor to an extended allegory and that the meaning of a specific symbol may vary in different contexts.

Chapter 6

The Revelation: A Book of Worship

Why are you using the book of Revelation to talk about preaching? The question suggests that there are better areas in scripture that deal with preaching than in this book. While I do not argue that point, I do believe that a person can find in few other resources such a wide array of opportunities for speaking to the human condition as there are in the Apocalypse of St. John. It is a book of parallels, contrasts, and tenses. It is a narrative that takes you from a bright beginning, through a troublesome, up and down experience, and concludes with a happy ending.

Pastoral Function of the Book of Revelation

One of the greatest attributes to contemporary preaching in the book of Revelation is it parallel to real life, every day existence. The story begins with God coming into the human experience as an assurance of His control over past, present, and future. "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending" (Rev. 1:8). It tells of humanity's journey and God's mercy, compassion, and love for us.

One may wonder whether the book has anything to do with the context of worship at all. I am certain that because of the overwhelming presence of judgment and warnings of doom

and destruction one might question the presence of its pastoral function. However, I see clearly the role of the Apocalypse in worship. In fact, the book of Revelation is a book of worship.

The reader of the Revelation can quickly and easily get so caught up in the prophetic content of the book that they fail to see that all of the activities and experiences take place within the context of worship. According to one scholar:

One of the most striking features of Revelation is its repeated portrayal of worship scenes in heaven, usually in the context of imagery related to the Old Testament sanctuary. Not only are there a great number of hymns in the book, but the very blessing and curses on those who read and hear Revelation imply a public reading of the book in a worship setting.¹

This means that our experiences, whether good or bad, are always viewed, felt, and shared under the gaze of the Almighty God of heaven. It also means that one can better understand corporate worship from the perspectives offered by John.

As an example of such a view, consideration has been given in the S.D.A. Church to worship renewal. Raymond Holmes says:

A specific and distinctive liturgical mission has been given to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in a particular historical context: the ecumenical age. Our mandate is: "Fear God and give him glory, for the

¹ Jon Paulien, "A Worship Setting," in Symposium on Revelation: Book I, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 81.

hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth" (Rev 14:7). The first half of this biblical statement provides the historical setting: Christ has entered the second (judgment) phase of His heavenly ministry. The second half describes the major activity of the church living in that historical setting--it worships. Adventist forms of worship, therefore, must make the same connection. They must grow out of theological reflection on worship as Revelation 14 sees it--intimately related to the ministry of our Lord in heaven. Ministers and congregations that take seriously the heavenly ministry of Christ as that ministry impinges on worship will learn to think theologically and liturgically about worship.²

The ultimate goal of worship is a confrontation with God as we know Him in Christ as Seventh-day Adventists (Rev. 4:11 and 5:9-10, 12-13). While worship itself constitutes the confrontation, liturgy or ritual--what we say and what we do when we worship, and how we say and do it constitutes the articulation, the definition, the illustration of that confrontation. Thus worship and its forms become an object lesson, a living illustration and definition of what we believe. Worship serves a proclamation, prophetic function.³

One of the greatest clues to the concept of the book of Revelation as a book of worship is the fact that it was written by a pastor, coming from God, to be distributed to the churches and read and heard in corporate worship. Rev. 1:4; 2, 3 reveal this intent. The mission of Christian

²Holmes, Sing a New Song, 10.

³ Ibid.

preaching is proclamation. To proclaim the good news of God and of Jesus Christ is the mission and duty of every person who mounts the Christian pulpit. The message that we preach is one that revives hope and instills courage in the midst of trouble. As pastor, John wants to tell his members that hope is never lost as long as the Christian continues to maintain unmoving faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the pitfalls of life, the influence of evil, or the weight of oppression and the threat of death, the faithful will be rewarded. This is the kind of news that strengthens people who have their share of trouble. This is something that every generation can relate to. John specializes in the themes of human struggle.

For example, in Rev. 5:1-3 the scene opens with the people of God facing a horrible dilemma.

And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?" And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.

This is an example of the condition of the oppressed who are helpless to secure the advantages that are available to the human family because of the onslaught of sin. Because this scene takes place in the heavens, the book

appears to have cosmic implications. Helpless to overcome the disadvantage of unworthiness, it looks like the blessing which comes from reading and hearing this message would be lost. No one could be found until the "Lion of Judah" (Jesus Christ) was slain. It is acknowledged that He is worthy to open the book and to secure the blessings in behalf of God's people.

Such an intervention brings a sigh of relief and cheers of joy and praise. It brings a smile to the sad face and renewed hope to those who suffer. All of heaven worships the Lamb for the incredible sacrifice that made these blessings possible. The feeling conveyed to the reader and hearer is that God's mercy always comes through for the faithful. In times of disappointment and imminent ruin God will come through.

Worship is a time where the people of faith come together to praise God for His blessings and sustaining power which He shares with us. It is a time to reaffirm our faith and receive spiritual nurture from the Word. All of the terrible experiences of life are set aside and God's presence in our experience is remembered. This is the pastoral function of the book of Revelation--consoling, encouraging and supporting the hearers of the word.

Preaching the Last Word

God calls contemporary preachers to a special ministry in a critical period of time. He calls them to preach the Gospel in the closing period of earth's history. In that context His call is to participate in the preaching of the last Word. The Bible says:

I saw another angel flying in mid heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; and he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water." (Rev. 14:6,7)

These two verses, which contain Christ's last message to the church living, worshipping, and evangelizing in the last days, are basic to the whole theological system and understanding of God's Word and the purpose for the church. The major reason for the existence of that church is found in chapter 14 of Revelation. From this passage the church receives its mandate. A mandate is an order, or commission, given by a higher power to a lower power or group. For the church, then, this passage constitutes our marching orders.⁴

However, even more than this is implied. Revelation 14 also describes the nature of the work entrusted to the church and the preacher. It tells them the location where

⁴ Holmes, Last Word, 1.

they are to carry out their work "into all the earth"; not in a vacuum or in secret, but in the world and community where everyone can benefit from it.

It also indicates how they will carry out their work. They are to preach it, to announce or proclaim it with a loud voice , to proclaim the gospel of the second coming of Jesus Christ who will save the world. This suggests that there is a boldness which accompanies the preacher who carries this message to the world in these last days.

Any one who preaches today recognizes that because of the conditions and challenges that exist today in our communities, it is not for the faint to attempt to fulfill this work. It must be met with the confidence of the gospel soldier who understands, that the enemy is armed with live rounds and is firing straight and accurately. The claim of the soldier is "here is the patience of the saints" (ver.12). "It is enough that God has established the preaching office as one of the means of His self-revelation. But we must do it well. The Protestant principle that preaching is central to the life of the church must be reaffirmed. God has a message for the world that the world needs to hear, and which He says needs to be proclaimed."⁵

⁵ Ibid., 2.

There is an urgency in the proclamation of the gospel. Revelation 1 says "the time is at hand." For what?--"things that must shortly come to pass." The call of Revelation 14 further presses this point: "The hour of his judgment is come." Judgment must shortly come to pass. This is the urgent news from heaven. This is why its proclamation is characterized as coming with the speed of angels. With the onrush of decay in our society, drugs, AIDS, hunger, war, and greed, the world can no longer wait and waste. The gospel of Christ must be preached.

Preaching is the act in which the word of God is proclaimed in awe and adoration among those who worship (first angel). It is also the speech in which the doom of the beast world is announced (second angel). And it is the discourse by which guidance is given for holy living (third angel). This many dimensioned, world-making, salvation-shaping, reality-orienting word of God is always under threat of being silenced or muffled. It is silenced by closing the book in which it is written. It is silenced by the sound and fury of the daily traffic. It is silenced by the buzzing of ambition and covetousness in our own brains. Preaching gives the silenced word sound again, making it resonate in our ears so that we deal with God not as a memory but as immediately and personally spoken to us.⁶

The preacher of the gospel today must keep a constant vigil on the world in which we live so that the gospel can reach the people where they live. Eugene Peterson says:

In a political world in which so many things are happening at once--wars, alliances, negotiations, tragedies, new leaders announcing hope, study groups coming up with plans that will solve the problems of famine and war--it is certainly urgent that we keep up

⁶ Peterson, 129.

with the news so that we can be informed and act responsibly in the world. With so much news to attend to, who has time for preaching, which is the furthest thing from the news? We are apt to think so until, in the middle of the battle, we find our courage flagging and our commitment wavering, and realize that the world is not primarily a place where information is stored and retrieved, but a moral and spiritual contest in which we are embattled. Then we are grateful for a proclamation from some mid heaven pulpit, telling us again what God says about what is happening, turning information into command or promise, translating moral memories into spiritual urgencies.⁷

Raymond Holmes expresses this point this way:

He must give the appropriate spin to the events that shock and amaze the sensitivities of those who must endure until the end. If preaching is to be timeless the preacher must study the Word of God. If it is to be timely he must be a student of life. He cannot isolate himself behind a mountain of theological books. His interest in true stories about life will enliven his preaching and assist in its relevancy care, will do the same.⁸

While the preacher must remain true to his or her calling to preach in spite of hostile conditions, that is conditions that have made the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ unpopular, they should also keep in focus the fact that they are speaking for God. As Ian Maclarn says, "attempt to speak a good word for God." The entire book of Revelation is a document from God to the world entrusted to care of human beings. It is our responsibility to properly proclaim God's self-revelation to the world. This is made possible through preaching from the book of Revelation

⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁸ Holmes, Sing a New Song, 121.

because God makes it clear in this book of the Bible what He is doing and what He intends to do for us in the future.

God speaks through the preacher as a conduit to communicate what He will do to the world and in particular to His people of faith. In light of the struggle that is common to life in the end time, which the book of Revelation addresses, the task of preaching the message of this book helps the preacher reveal the activities for God on behalf of His people.

A few years ago one of my members became ill and went to the doctor for tests to determine what the problem was. It was horrifying to learn that she had cancer of the liver. To make matters worse, the doctors were less than hopeful. I watched her condition degenerate to the point where she was in constant and excruciating pain. She lost a lot of weight and grew very weak. I also witnessed the emotional roller coaster that she rode, struggling to maintain strong faith under such bleak conditions. I found myself struggling to find the right things to say that would give her hope--the kind of hope that would transcend her condition. I found in the book of Revelation tremendous encouragement for the struggle.

During my visits we would read of God's involvement in the affairs of men and women, in good times and bad, in

prosperity and adversity. She responded by confessing trust in God and Jesus Christ and her faith grew and grew. Near the end of her life, she was unmoved by the reality that she would not get well. That did not matter because she knew that God was in control of her future. The end of this life did not end her hope. She believed that her eternal destiny was wrapped up in Jesus' promise to the believer:

And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, "Write, Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord, from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they rest from their labors; and their works do follow them." (Rev. 14:13)

There are so many things in the experiences of people that cause so many to lose faith and hope. People both young and old are dropping out of life because hope has died. The power of the gospel can revive that hope once again. The work of the preacher is to continue to preach the word of life and rekindle hope in the world.

Chapter 7

The Revelation: A Book for Preaching

In talking about the book of Revelation as a book of preaching, I am concerned more with the homiletical application of the book. This is in no way suggesting that after the interpretive work is done the preacher then sets it all aside and applies the content of the book to the pulpit without connecting the prior work to it. Certainly it is always understood that there is such a thing as homiletical license, and probably too often abused. Preachers across the globe have taken this license at the expense of sound interpretive principals. It is possible to apply the previous work of interpretation to the real life situations of the congregation and the community.

This section will attempt to encourage the preacher to remain faithful to the text, not to abandon his or her research, and seek to draw the natural parallels of the text to the situations and issues of contemporary society. This is important in that much of pastoring and preaching is about the communication of the truth. Many of the members of our churches are expressing an interest in legitimate research and scholarship that keeps the original meaning of the text in view when considering the text. This kind of

preaching retains its credibility in the minds of an increasingly educated congregation.

H. Grady Davis in his book, Design for Preaching says that "a sermon is an organism with the parts of the sermon (substance and form), coming together in relation to each other."¹ If this is true, then the text becomes an ally to the sermon idea and should add to the understanding of what the preacher is trying to say. The themes of the book of Revelation are not foreign to the themes of life and should aid in addressing the many contemporary issues of the twentieth-century Christians.

When considering how this book can address such issues the student of the Apocalypse must first determine how the text is to be interpreted in light of the situation at hand. In dealing with this kind of literature there are three areas that must be considered: they are form, function, and content.² When we talk about form, the tendency is to speak in terms of the genre of apocalyptic literature, whose characteristics are that of other-worldly journeys, visitation of angels, imagery and symbols, etc.

As a book for preaching, the Apocalypse is seen as embracing life at the grass roots of human existence. While seeming to provide wings of escape from the hurts and pains

¹ Henry Grady Davis, Design for Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 22-23.

² Rogers and Jeter, 10-11.

of life, filled with disappointment and trouble. The Revelation deals squarely with the issues of life and death. It brings a sense of everything being out of control but under the eternal gaze of God. It feeds the human appetite for comfort and protest, problem and promise, judgment and mercy. As we look at some contemporary issues, let's see how the text of the Revelation can inform the preacher in addressing them. We will look at two major areas where the book is effective in preaching.

Themes of Comfort

The first is comfort. In the twentieth-century and moving to the twenty-first century the greatest concern for people today is the future of the family. This is the subject of countless TV talk shows. Indeed, the "baby-boomer" has finally grown up. As we see the sky-rocketing national debt, uncontrollable crime, pollution, and human tragedy, the future looks bleak. The feeling is that we are about to leave our children worse off than what our parents left us. We are a nation of greedy consumers devouring more than our share without concern for the well-being of future generations.

The comfort of the book of Revelation cautions us to steady the course. God is in control. The beast power has

caused much pain and suffering, but God will straighten it all out.

Fear

This is a frightful reality. As a generation that lives its life under the threat of nuclear annihilation, we should have some sympathy for the fears and apprehensions of our offspring. Mothers are afraid to let their children leave home to play or walk to school for fear that they will not return. Husbands and fathers leave home for work wondering if things will be as they left them upon their return, or if they themselves will fall victim to the road hazards of the day. There continues to be tremendous apprehension as to the stability of job security in the work place. The more we think about what the future may hold in store, the more we quiver.

As we search through the book of Revelation for comfort for the family we are confronted with the hope of a bright tomorrow. Certainly the forebodings of the possibilities of disaster striking at any time are enough to keep us hiding in our closets, however, the strong emphasis on things working out all right is reassuring. As we see God operate through the history of Christianity, we gain insight as to God's presence in our lives today. We recognize that God is on our side fighting the battles with us, and when we are

not able He is fighting them for us. Only the Christian, who trusts God explicitly and loves Jesus completely, can relate to this. Preachers must understand this intimately for many of them have children of their own. These children are exposed to the same dangers and snares as all others. The preacher communicates this ethos by presenting to the listener how God has come through on behalf of men and women and children for generations. Just as a song writer once wrote, "angels watchin' over me my Lord," the congregation recognizes that God is in control of their destiny.

As the mother and father see the figure in Revelation 1 walking among the candlesticks, they are assured that God is with them. As they read the letters to the "seven churches which are in Asia" they claim each promise personally as if God meant it for them only. As they realize the challenges that come with rearing children in a crazy deformed world, they see that through all the chaos and confusion God will bring order one day. We pray for our children daily knowing that God hears us and that the prayers of the saints are like the incense that ascends over the veil into the very presence of God.

Death

When we speak of death, the book of Revelation can bring comfort to our members and listeners. I have been in the homes of loved ones left behind and witnessed the weeping and wailing, the tear tracked faces trying their best to smile, but unable to conceal the hurt and pain that is so real and overwhelming. I recall looking into those faces and wrestling with the one question that is written on all of them. Why? This is, in my opinion, one of the most difficult things that the minister has to deal with. Facing death, whether they are looking at it in the coffin or feeling the life being sucked out of them on their beds of destiny they must realize that He's got it all under control.

Death has a way of robbing people of companionship, joy, security, even faith. What we feel behind the scenes of confusion and turmoil, behind the metaphors and imagery are the billions of tears, the pain, the heartache of the loss of so many, is seen in those who are weeping under the altar crying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10). It is seen and felt through the eyes of John as he sits in his solitary confinement experiencing the ache for the company of friends, family, and familiar faces.

The "white robes were given unto every one of them and it was said unto them to rest..." (Rev. 6:11), is the assurance that God would personally handle the situation and it will be okay. The declaration of the Revelator in Rev. 21:4 gives comfort to the soul that is alone and separated that "God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." And when the tears for that loved one flow uncontrollably down already soaked cheeks, the words of Rev. 14:13 bring a sense of calm: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea saith the spirit, that they may rest from their labors and their works do follow them." This is the "stuff" of effective preaching for our pulpits today.

Salvation

As we talk about themes of comfort in the book of Revelation, it would be irresponsible not to speak concerning those of salvation and restoration. Through the entire book the themes of salvation and restoration are weaved. Salvation is the goal in which God has invested all of heaven's resources. Deliverance from evil in all of its forms and a total restoration of the family of God in the end is His supreme agenda. From the historical section

(Rev. 1-14) to the victory section (Rev. 15-22), God is seen working out salvation on behalf of the human family.

From the very beginning, as the record is seen coming down from heaven to humanity, there is a suspicion that God is intimately concerned about their destiny. The content and feel of the book has all of the ear-markings of a situation that has gone awry. John portrays evil as having corrupted every aspect of his society. Persecution of the church is seen as the result of this evil presence.

The nature of this evil presence is revealed at its root as the war between God and Satan, where the struggle meets its pinnacle in Rev. 12. Here is where Satan is seen firing at the very heart of the church as the symbols of Christ and His church are under attack from the beginning. "And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads." "...and the dragon stood before the woman which was about ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born" (Rev. 12:2-4). In this scripture the very existence of the church is at stake. What is going to be the outcome? Will the forces of evil prevail over good? Will Jesus be consumed and the church destroyed? Is God powerless to help

his church and his people who have become the object of Satan's rage toward God and Jesus?

This struggle parallels the turmoil that wars with the person who finds himself or herself under spiritual attack. Time and again we fight the battles of moral and social justice in our communities, which appear in many ways to be losing ones. Too often we see another child reeled in by gangs. Too often we count the mounting casualties that have fallen victim to drugs. Too many of our children are being carried out in body bags due to gang violence, drive-bys, and abuse. Too many mothers and wives are having to flee their homes to seek shelter from the stormy relationships that escalate into batterings--and these are the lucky ones. Too many of our young women and men are dying in wars that they do not make nor do they understand. It is quite understandable why so many are looking through eyes of hopelessness and despair

However, John does not allow his reader and fellow church brethren to remain hopelessly lost. Though the battle is fierce and intense, the reader is encouraged and inspired to know that Jesus Christ has not abandoned his people. "And Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven....

And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of the brethren is cast down" (Rev. 12:7,10). Here we find Jesus fighting our battles and promising his people victory against the enemies of the saints. This victory is accomplished through the sacrifice that was made on the cross of Calvary. "And they overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:11).

As the book closes, we are reminded about the gift of salvation when we see the saga winding down. There's the heavenly city coming down after the old world is totally destroyed. God remakes the world which is totally opposite to the old one--no sin, no pain, no death. All things are new. All things are pure and holy and good. The promise of salvation is realized as Jesus bestows his rewards upon the faithful (Rev. 21:1).

Second Advent of Jesus Christ

The next theme of comfort is the second advent of Jesus Christ. This is the main theme and subject of the book of Revelation. By introducing the book as a revelation of Jesus Christ, the reader is led into actively looking for Jesus to burst on the scene to rescue humanity from the awful experiences of pain and suffering. Preaching this

theme becomes focal and primary for the faithful homiletician. Any preaching of this book that does not embrace the second advent of Christ in some way is not revealing its central figure. The book of Revelation, in one way or another, presents Christ as the Savior of the world who will return to deliver the saints from the destructive hand of evil.

Developing the themes of the advent of Christ can be done in either section of The Revelation. In the historical section (Rev. 1-14), we can preach on the faithfulness of Christ on behalf of His people who were exposed to great peril at the hand of those who opposed the truth. Millions of Christians were martyred for the sake of Christ. However, through the trial and agony of persecution they were strengthened by the grace of God and the promise of Christ's presence and eventual deliverance. M. Eugene Boring in his sermon "Everything Is Going To Be All Right", makes it clear that this is God's promise to those who suffer. In response to the paradox of the experience of the believers and the good news of hope he says "why do we cringe, why is it that the message of Revelation is so hard to hear? Because in the midst of our situation, it confronts us with the scandalous good news that the one who died as the victim of the world's evil is the Victor, and

that the one revealed in his life and death is the God and savior of all creation."³

Also, it is easy to find the theme of Christ's advent in the eschatological section of the Revelation because of the obvious nature of the end time conclusion of the book. Christ is the one who returns, destroys the sinful world, and makes anew His kingdom on the earth. The benefit of preaching these themes from this book is the real life connections that the listener and the preacher are able to make. God is the same "yesterday, today, and forever." His work is done on behalf of fallen humanity to restore them as sons and daughters of God and heirs to the kingdom. The parallels that reveal his interest in saving men and women today are just as significant as they were for those whom John wrote. The preacher can almost pick up the newspaper today and draw his or her comparison with the chosen text. This makes preaching live in the lives and minds of the listener and makes the sermon come alive.

I remember during the time of "Desert Storm" when for many, perhaps the world, thoughts of life as we know it were about to come to an end. You could pick up the newspapers and almost hear the echoes of the Apocalypse vibrating from the pages. Preaching during that time had no shortage of

³ M. Eugene Boring, "Everything Is Going to Be Alright," in Preaching Through the Apocalypse: Sermons from Revelation, eds., Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St Louis: Chalice Press, 1992), 82.

listeners. People wanted to at least hear some clues as to what all of this meant for twentieth century society. In many ways, they were looking for someone to tell them that everything would be all right. The message of the book of Revelation was a message of reassurance that lifted the hopes of thousands.

Revelation's message is still germane today. From the annals of John's Apocalypse, rivers of hope flow from the throne room of the Almighty. The expectation of the coming of Jesus Christ and the destruction of sin and evil in all of its forms is the blessed hope for countless millions as we witness, almost on a daily basis, the fulfillment of predicted end-time events. Revelation is a reminder that God is in control and that he will triumph in the end.

And around the throne is a rainbow." We have read Revelation before, and we know what a deluge of catastrophes it portrays. But Revelation is also the only New Testament book to take up the Old Testament sign of hope, the emblem of God's covenant with the earth and all life upon it. The blood and thunder are there in Revelation, as they are in the world. But John sees them framed by the sign of hope.⁴

From the first verse of this book to the last, our hopes are carried on the expectation of the coming of our Lord. As the book ends, we are on the edge of our seats watching Jesus come time and again to the aid of helpless humanity. We are invited to become participants in this

⁴ Ibid, 78.

event and left with this image firmly planted in our minds and deeply etched in our hearts. "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

Themes of Protest

There is wide support for the apparent themes that have been sighted in the book of Revelation. Few would argue the presence of these themes, though there is division on how they should be properly understood and applied. However, there is another genre of themes that speak to the spiritual as well as contemporary and historical issues of the Christian era. I would categorize these themes as themes of protest. Protest seems to be a part of the kind of literature with which we have been dealing. Though others may see apocalyptic literature as a tool for escaping the realities of the world, many have noticed its inherent rebuke of the ills of society itself.

In apocalyptic literature, there is a total dissatisfaction of the present order of things and a desire and expectation that the present order will be destroyed and replaced with a new order. The warnings and judgments all serve as a wake-up call to the forces that have run amuck. These forces usually have a governmental or religious characteristic or both. Usually there are scathing rebukes

directed at these forces and a prediction of their demise. Everything that is connected with this system will experience the same outcome. Room is given for repentance, but change is not anticipated.

Oppression

Embedded in the message of the Apocalypse, almost hidden from view, especially from the view of those who are responsible for the abuses perpetrated on the oppressed, are these messages of protest. Watch words are used through symbols and images to communicate openly to the community, avoiding the threat of reprisal. These words are understood and familiar to the members of the community. Words in the Revelation such as Babylon (Rome), beasts (governments), seals, trumpets, and etc., are words that carry the themes of protest and allow John's material to be widely distributed under the noses of the very ones whose actions are disputed.

Contemporary themes can be drawn out of the book of Revelation that fit perfectly the situations of today's society. Oppression was a major problem of John's day. It continues to be so today. Racism, sexism, power, and greed are at the heart of almost all of the abuses that existed yesterday and today. Peoples lives are being made miserable because someone has placed themselves over others

and determined what rights they will enjoy and those they will not. As we look at some of these themes of protest, we want to view them as opportunities to preach the gospel of Christ to address the situation and bring hope to the people involved.

The book of Revelation serves as a stearn rebuke for those systems, governments, and individuals whose philosophy and practice place others at a disadvantage. The moral implications are too many to handle in this project. However, for our discussion, I do want to address a few as a basis for developing a theology for preaching the book of Revelation as protest toward injustice wherever it is encountered.

Community Responsibility

During the year 1992, I pastored a church in South Central Los Angeles. The year 1992 is important because this was the year of the Los Angeles riots. The year, or more like two and one-half years, were very troublesome for L.A. citizens. Decades of discrimination, police abuse, unemployment, gangs and drugs had taken their toll on the community. Thousands of young people had had enough of the second-class citizen treatment. The promise that things were going to get better and that the American dream was within reach of everyone was fading.

The city had just gone through several critical situations where justice for African-Americans seemed to have floundered. For a year the city, nation, and the world viewed the infamous tape of the Rodney King beating where over twenty police officers in one way or another took part. The trial of four of the officers was moved to Simi Valley where the largest number of police officers reside. It was on a Wednesday. The atmosphere was thick with the expectation that a verdict would be reached. Most believed that the four officers would pay for their crime. However, the all-white jury acquitted the officers and shocked the nation.

I was in my office preparing for prayer meeting when I decided to call a fellow minister friend for something. The verdict had come just prior to my leaving for the office. The voice on the other end of the line said, "It's started." I'm not sure why for a moment I did not understand what he was talking about. When he said it, my mind immediately went to the devastating scenes of Revelation. Then I put it all together and an empty feeling came over me. It was the same feeling I had felt when I saw the first bombs fall on Baghdad during "Desert Storm."

Then reality set in and I could only think of two things; one, that I was only three miles from the flash

point, and two, the well-being of my family. I hurried out of the office and home to make sure that my wife and daughter were okay. Upon arriving home, and for the next three days, I watched in horror while L.A. burned.

I felt helpless because there was nothing that I could do. For several years my church and I had worked in the community to restore hope and a sense of optimism in the lives of this community and now it was going up in flames. For many years we had witnessed the social decay of a community that needed so much: jobs going out and drugs coming in; the proliferation of gang activity; escalating teen-pregnancy and high school drop-out rates. Our young men and boys believed that the chances of making their 21st birthday were remote. We could see the frustration on the faces and hear the anger in the voices. We knew that the fuse was short and that it was lit. Anything could set it off at any moment.

That Friday morning, my family and I went to the church central headquarters in Glendale. As we drove down Interstate 10 you could smell the smoke that filled the morning air. We could see the plumes of smoke bellowing into the air, competing with the sun for the day. My heart pounded inside, because I did not know what the outcome would be. As I contemplated the reasons for such an

outburst of anger, the age-old social problems reverberated within my soul.

In the Revelation we are reminded that when the future is in doubt, look to God for assurance. This was the message that I preached to my congregation. However, this book, with its solemn warnings to the oppressor for injustice, was also the message that occupied much of my conversation concerning the problems that contributed to the riot.

During the next few weeks of cleanup that followed, I remember a statement given by an Anglo woman which was broadcast on the six-o'clock news. She said, as she was helping in the cleanup effort, "first we will clean up the mess that the riots caused, then we will clean up the mess that caused the riot." I thought that this was a beautiful concept, but four years later, the same problems and tensions that preceded the unrest still exist, maybe even to a greater degree.

Allan A. Boesak, speaking on the unjust system of apartheid through the eyes of the Apocalypse, says, "Another characteristic of these books is their explicit political criticism. Apocalyptic literature's primary concern is precisely the situation in which God's people find themselves in the world, a situation that is caused by

political, social, and economic forces which are identified, challenged, and called to account in a unique way."⁵ What this means is that the preacher has a responsibility to speak the truth to those who have participated in oppressing others, because that system will not survive. God will bring it to an end.

Individual Responsibility

For the individual, the Revelator points to his or her responsibility in the whole scheme of things and will not hold a person guiltless who does not make an effort to eradicate injustice wherever it is found. The protest of the Apocalypse is the call to come out of "Babylon" that her evil influence does not cause you to participate in her sins.

The individual must not give in to the temptations of the beast power. The beast is corrupt and wants to influence all to be the same. It is perfectly content with the indifference that most people conduct themselves. It is easy to do nothing in the face of such overwhelming odds. However, the individual must fight off all temptation of indifference and resist such injustice for the sake of the oppressed.

⁵ Boesak, 17-18.

The individual is also responsible for developing spiritual integrity. A clean heart and pure motives are essential in the struggle to overcome sin. John calls his hearer and reader to be pure which is in contrast to the impure beast.

Lastly, the individual must prepare for the end of the old world of corruption and new world of righteousness. The preacher has a unique responsibility in that he must preach the everlasting gospel that calls the community to action. He preaches because of his call to ministry, and he calls others to take up the challenge to resist the beast power and prepare themselves for similar ministry.

Chapter 8

Twenty-first Century Agenda for Preaching the Book of
Revelation

As we consider an agenda for preaching the book of Revelation in an urban context, we must understand the situation that we meet when considering ministry there. All of the needs, fears, hopes, resources and challenges should be weighed carefully to know just where it itches. Only then can we begin to comprehend the role that the Apocalypse plays in that community.

In this section, I will discuss the trilogy of evil of Revelation 13 from a contemporary perspective, as well as Revelation 14 in light of a church situation. My intent is to use these scriptures as an example of how preaching can utilize them in addressing the needs of an urban setting.

The Trilogy of Evil of Revelation 13 Discussed
in Contemporary Terms

As I discuss the "trilogy of evil" in contemporary terms, I will proceed in light of the understanding of prophecy as contemporary-historical interpretation, which sees the fulfillment of prophecy at different times and in different ways in the history of the world.

The trilogy of evil, as I see it in Revelation 13, is the dragon, the beast of the sea, and the beast of the land.

The activity of the three are united in purpose and that is to destroy the people of God in faith and confidence.

First of all, there is the dragon. He is described in Revelation 12 as Lucifer, the serpent, and the devil. He is considered to be the author and perpetrator of all evil or the principle evil. From him is born the condition of separation, hopelessness, selfishness, greed, etc. In fact, throughout the Bible, he has waged war with God Himself, and it is his desire to divert the worship of God to himself (Isaiah 14).

As I see the dragon's function in Rev. 13, he directs his evil influence toward the people of God after having tried to destroy the one whom God sent in Rev. 12 to rule in His kingdom. With cunning, boldness, and power, he is determined to succeed in his mission of destruction.

As we turn to the present reality we find society having the presence and influence of evil on all levels of life. With crime, injustice, powerlessness, greed, anxiety, poverty, etc., it certainly cannot be denied that the dragon is here. The effects of his influence are felt everywhere and in verse 4 "they worshipped the dragon," is evident in the conditions that enslave and oppress men and women today.

Verse 1 of Revelation 13 says that John saw a beast rising out of the sea or waters. Boesak sees the waters as commotion or confusion. This is evident of periods of great distress. The beast is indicative of government that has

authority or power, symbolized by the seven heads and ten horns and ten crowns, and this power at its very core opposes God--which is the exact nature of the dragon. In fact, verse 2 indicates that the power of the beast is given to it by the dragon, which accounts for its similarity of behavior.¹

Eugene Peterson sees this beast as the dragon's use of force or coercion. This beast seems to embody all of the components of brute force and power, as it was like a leopard with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion. Its chief objective was to "make war with the saints with the intent of overcoming them."²

John, in verses 7 and 8, depicts the very struggle of man and especially those who are associated with the Lamb. It is a struggle where the stakes are high and the battle is intense. It is the struggle of the oppressed. Those who are disadvantaged feel the weight of the forces of evil and some are overcome.

Now here is where we have to be careful, because in our cities many see the odds stacked up against them and the first response, as we read John's testimony is that of despair. However, John does not leave the reader of faith hopeless. For he says that only those whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life will be overcome. This

¹ Boesak, 93.

² Peterson, 123.

is good news, because the oppressor will ultimately be the captive (verse 10).

Then John sees the workings of the dragon again. This time he sees another beast coming out of the earth. The unique characteristic about this beast is that it seems to be one thing, but in reality it is something entirely different. It looks like a lamb, but speaks like a dragon. Peterson says that this is the second part of the twofold approach of the devil to defeat God's people. This approach is that of deception. The first beast appeared to be put out of commission, however the second beast was able to exercise all the power of the first beast.³

I see this as saying, what the first beast could not do by force, the second beast will do by deceit. He uses counterfeit, trickery, and cunning which are all traits of the dragon or the devil. This suggests to us that the devil will use any means possible to defeat God's people, whether it is discouragement, disaster, or disappointment.⁴

Our communities are so desperate that many will try anything to liberate themselves. It might be through drugs, crime, deception, or self-affliction. Verse 14 suggests that they will follow the direction of evil itself in order to experience liberation. When this happens, the wound of

³ Ibid., 124-25.

⁴ Ibid.

the first beast is healed. This healing is at the expense of others.

If I may make an application here concerning the "mark of the beast," it appears to accomplish the work of the dragon through exploitation and control. By using the system of commercialism, it is able to manipulate people to do what it wants them to do. It is able to control belief and practice because of its control over the most basic institutions of society. This is the very behavior of the oppressor. The destiny of whole communities is at stake. This kind of control can bring whole countries to their knees. This reveals the magnitude of the hopelessness that pervades the urban cities which leaves the people in a condition of desolation and despair. The impact of denying access into society accounts for much of the condition of the oppressed. Systematic discrimination and racism produces generations of hopeless individuals who feel that the system will not and cannot work for them. This fact is responsible for a great deal of the moral and social destruction of the urban community.

This is when the promises of Jesus begin to take on their full meaning and impact. The promise is to the overcomer. Those whose names are found written in the Lamb's book of life are the only ones who will make it. In

the midst of all the turmoil, under the weight of pressure and control by the forces and influences of evil, God stands as the one who is able to deliver His people out of the hand of the oppressor. He is all powerful and He assures us that His power is available to us. He is all wise and that wisdom is available to us.

In the last verse of Revelation 13, John challenges the oppressed to use the understanding and wisdom that God gives because, with the correct understanding, we will have no reason to be afraid. He says that the number is a human number. The number 666 according to Peterson and Boesak is the failure to reach the perfect number seven three times, 777.⁵ My own interpretation of this idea is that the devil and his agencies can do all that they want but only the true and perfect God will triumph and His people with Him.

Meeting the Challenges of an Urban Pulpit: A Theological
Basis for Community Action

The Condition of the Church

I used to pastor a church located in South Central Los Angeles. This church was established some thirty-five years ago through the vision and effort of a few committed people who believed that Jesus Christ was coming soon. They felt that the responsibility of warning the world was incumbent

⁵ Peterson, 126.

upon those who looked forward to this blessed event. So with dedicated zeal, conviction, and sacrifice, they launched a campaign to establish a fellowship of Seventh-day Adventist Christians to work specifically for persons in this area of Los Angeles.

They sought to accomplish their task with a series of home community Bible studies and community visitations, which culminated in an evangelistic meeting that resulted in several souls accepting Christ as their personal Savior. To these new Christians were joined workers and leaders from neighboring sister churches which made up the nucleus of believers dedicated to the work of proclaiming the love of Christ to the surrounding community.

After the eleven years of spiritual leadership and nurturing from their first pastor, the church spent the next 25 years in a state of transitional leadership, averaging one pastor every 2 1/2 years up to the present time. This movement of leadership has taken its toll on the church. For the past 15-20 years, the congregation has grown apathetic toward leadership, mission, and ministry. They have been in a steady decline with the last three years leveling off.

Though there has been some numerical growth over the past two years, the overall attitude has not changed much. Having had the privilege of pastoring this urban

congregation for the past year, this pastor has observed the sense of hopelessness and helplessness in the members. They feel that pastors come and go without having a genuine commitment to them. They also feel that the central organization has shown little regard or concern for them.

This feeling of helplessness has also produced a lack of mission and vision. Several times in the past year they have expressed a desire to get something going, but once started, the momentum faded. They have expressed frustration with the starting and stalling of programs, and feel that with the limited amount of resources there is not much that can be done.

Over the past ten plus years they have experienced a significant reduction in attendance. Out of a membership of 370, only about 120-130 people are present from Sabbath to Sabbath. This drop off is the result of many of the original members and early believers retiring, moving away, dying, or growing discouraged and dropping out. Also many of the young people are growing up and relocating or moving their memberships to neighboring churches that they feel have more to offer.

The enthusiasm toward their original witness in the community has almost died, which may be accounted for in the next section, and the members, for the most part, have fallen into the one-day-a-week habit.

The Condition of the Community

The church community has drastically changed over the past 3 1/2 decades. When the church was founded, the community was predominately Black. The specific ethnicity of the community influenced the ethnic growth of the church. However, over the years the community has become Hispanic. Much of the demographics reveal that the community is largely made up of first generation Mexican-Americans, for whom English is a second language.

This community, because of its migratory origin, is faced with high unemployment, low levels of skills and education and a high birth rate. Low income families are apparent and there is an over all economically deficient condition that exists.

The community is also under siege. There is a pervasive gang problem that has divided the community along gang territorial boundaries. Graffiti is everywhere and gang activity and violence enslave the community with fear and suspicion. The climate seems to be cold and indifferent, with the streets unsafe to walk at night and even during the day at times.

The attitude toward the presence of the church is one of apathy and disrespect. The youth will spray paint the walls, throw trash in the yard and parking lot, and vandalize the property. At the same time, some of the same families will come and ask for food and clothing. In spite

of the many attempts to open our services to the Hispanic community, there has been no recent participation in the worship service. The members of the church go out once a month to visit the community and build a relationship with them, but this work has not been very fruitful. It is almost like they do not know that we exist and certainly do not care.

Drugs are also a problem. Crack cocaine is the drug of choice and its effect on the community is devastating. One night, as I was closing up after a night of evangelistic preaching, a young Hispanic male walked up to me looking for help. He was high on crack and had just been beaten. He asked me to have prayer for him that God would help him get out of the gang and off of crack. When he left I wondered just how many more like him are trapped in these circumstances.

The religious life of the community reflects two distinct orders: the old values of the elderly and their commitment to their faith, and the uncommitted young and their disregard for religion. Church is a place where parents and grandparents go and the youth and young adults feel little need in following. There are even times, and more than a few, when the worship service is in competition with their music and riotousness.

Community Issue

The community issue that I have chosen for discussion and action is the gang problem. Because of the wide spread gang involvement and gang activity, I thought this issue to be a concern that deserves immediate attention and substantive consideration. The church's community is plagued with many gangs and their mark is left on almost every wall and fence in the community.

The community has some gangs that are unique in that they are Satanic gangs. This seems to indicate the nature and magnitude of the influence that evil has on the community. These gangs are going around doing all kinds of things in our communities. In fact, Los Angeles county is plagued with several hundred gangs with over 60,000 members. We average over one gang-related homicide a day and whole communities are overrun with drugs and fear because of them. Residents are not safe on the streets at any time, and because of drive-by shootings, which are very common, they are not safe in their cars or homes either. Just this past Monday night, I passed by a gas station where a man had just been beaten and killed by gang members while getting gas. The police were there investigating the scene. The car was still sitting at the pump.

Young people live in fear in the community and at school. They are forced to join a gang for protection and/or belonging. On the playground, children are so

accustomed to gunfire that they immediately hit the ground face-down when they hear it. One of my members told me that she and her son were standing at the bus stop waiting for their bus when an apparent funeral of a "gang-banger" was passing by. All of a sudden, a rival gang drove by shooting wildly at the procession sending them scrambling for cover. To demonstrate the impact that such an influence has on our children, I took this same child home one day and as we were driving, he would point out to me all of the places where drugs were being sold. This boy was only 11 years old. Another member, a teenager, told me of the gangs on his street when I visited him. I asked him if he had encountered them in any way and he said that one morning he was walking down the street and a young man drove by and asked him if he was a gang member. He replied no. The man told him that the jeans and clothing that he was wearing were too much like the blue of the Crips and not to wear them any more. He and his brother are bussed into the valley some 60 miles one way in order to learn in a safe environment due to the gang problem.

I believe that the church must address the problem of gangs because it is one of the major problems in our communities as the data above indicates. Somehow the church must address the overwhelming influence of these gangs upon our youth. There are more young people joining gangs today than there are joining the church. Youth are learning the

values of the street more than the word of God and it is filling our youth with hopelessness. Our youth are consumed with living for today because they do not believe that they will live to become adults. It has made them hard and indifferent, and somehow the church must find a way to break this evil hold on them.

Theological Model for Action

I have chosen Revelation 14 as my text for theological model for action. It is a text that has significant meaning and impact for the Adventist Church and I believe gives the appropriate response to and process for the church's mission in dealing with the ills that pervade the community. The 14th chapter of Revelation gives to the church and the community the kind of inspiration and understanding of the condition of things with respect to knowing that regardless of what is going on in the community, God is in control and his people are called to faithfulness and steadfastness with Him.

In Rev. 14:1-5, John takes us up into heaven where hope and victory is realized. He shows us the "144,000 who have the name of the Father written in their foreheads." This is in contrast to the "mark of the beast" of Revelation 13 that is received by those who did not overcome the dragon, the beast, and his image. Immediately, worship and praise breaks out among the saved in response to the victory of the Lamb who stands on the "Mount Sion," which is symbolic of

the city or kingdom of God. It is the natural response for those who realize their victory over the evil influences of the dragon, governments, principalities and powers that attempted to usurp the oppressed saints of God. In Eugene Peterson's book, Reversed Thunder, he says:

Worship is our response to the Lamb's action among us, the action that redeems us from our plight. Our voices are augmented into song as we join creations praise of the Creator, Israel's thanks for salvation. Worship is the act in which our misunderstood and mis-spoken words are corrected and arranged into an expression of the whole truth of ourselves and our God; it is the act in which we find our fragmented lives corrected and arranged into a whole and perfect offering to God--by the action of the Lamb, we become spotless.⁶

Right here we find the true worth of worship. Right here in these first 5 texts we discover that worship is more than praise, singing, and adoration. It is acknowledging the action of the crucifixion and the resurrection.

The church and community are overwhelmed with hopelessness. The gang problem has distorted the perspective of worship for the church. The beast of aggression has forced the church into hiding and fear, and the church in many ways has succumbed to the threats of gang violence. This is why church activity has become a once-a-week affair. The church has to discover through this text the victory of the Lamb in its behalf, which will inspire us to the quality of true worship. This experience will have a renewing effect on the church.

⁶ Peterson, 128.

John then sees three angels flying in the sky. These angels have a threefold message to proclaim. This message is to go to those on the earth. The message in Revelation 14 is the embodiment of the "everlasting gospel" which is to go to everyone. This, I believe, is the scope of the mission of the church-- to proclaim this message of worship (first angel), call (second angel), and warning (third angel). Peterson labels them as worship, doom of beast world, and guidance for holy living. My paradigm agrees with his as a model for the church's response to community.⁷

In the message of the first angel we have the vision of the church. This vision is a declaration of hope to the community that is overrun by gang and satanic influences. Without this vision the church and community are consumed. However, the church is delivered the everlasting gospel, verse 6, which is the basis of its joy and praise. The context of the message is qualified by the victory of the Lamb of verse 1. Because He stands on the mount (a sign of victory), all of God's creation can worship Him. The vision of the Lamb standing on the Mount Sion seems to be taken from the imagery of Christ on the cross of Golgotha's hill, the universal symbol of victory over evil and sin. This is

⁷ Ibid., 129.

the message that the church has to preach in its oppressed and hopeless community. As the church presents this message to the community, it is saying as John said in Rev. 12 that the time is short. The efforts of the dragon are intensified and so the efforts of the church and community must intensify to meet the challenge of wide-spread gang influence.

The first angel calls our attention to the total control of God over the influence of evil. "The hour of His judgment is come," means that it is God's time now. He is running this thing and the time for fear and despair is not and has never been a part of the life of a faithful church. God has created the world and has never relinquished his creation to evil, and by defeating evil in heaven, victory on earth is sure.

In verse 8, we have God's call of His church to action. "Babylon is fallen, is fallen" is the message of hope. Babylon to John is confusion, fear, and the oppression of Rome that is defeated by the Lamb. For the work of the church it is the defeat of the power and evil influence of gang violence and control. The "wine of the wrath of her fornication" is the intoxicating control that has lured young fearful children into their false system of security which ends in death. For the system, or gang culture, her

fall is imminent and God is calling the faithful, who are the youth who overcome the deception of gang pressure, to come out, Rev. 18:4, "come out of her my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins." The chain which seems unbreakable is broken and now the prevailing influence of God wins over.

In verses 9-11 is the warning or guidance for holy living. Here is where God gives His redemptive warning to those who are caught up and bought into the system of false security. Some think that there is safety in conformity, but God says that the only safety is in the Lamb.⁸ The contrast of the mark of the beast versus the name of the Father or the seal of God is the contrast of faith. Will we follow God out of love or the beast out of fear? Will we worship the God of creation or succumb to the fears of gang violence? In other words, the faithful will respond faithfully to the call of God. This warning challenges us to live the kind of life that is consistent with the order of God and not with the order of the gang culture. If this is not the response of the youth, they will ultimately be consumed with the evil that is behind the gang movement.

Verse 12 is a description of those who by faith claimed the victory of the Lamb, "they that keep the commandments

⁸ Peterson, 130.

of God and the faith of Jesus." This is characteristic of the government of God. It is in contrast with the government of the dragon. Peterson says, "the politics of the dragon takes the superficial and the pretentious and inflates them into promises of dominion and reputation, seducing the ego and exacerbating pride, but the politics of the Lamb takes the ordinary and basic elements of our obedience...and develops them into the ultimate and eternal."⁹ This means that the church, community, and youth when standing for God, stand on the mount of victory with him. Verse 13 then is the song of the faithful who may feel the full weight of pressure to give in to the threat but refuse to falter. In life or in death, the Lamb stands with us in control and in possession of victory. We worship and praise Him for it.

As I see the paradigm for ministry influencing the kind of programs that the church would develop, I think that the model of worship, call, and warning are significant.

The worship of the church would create a sense of empowerment. The church is able to address its mission because God is victorious. This inspiration changes the entire perspective of the church. They see that something can be done because something has already been done. They

⁹ Ibid., 132.

are awakened out of their apathy and willing to work and worship the Lamb in spite of the circumstances, and in behalf of the community. This is nurturing for the church, spiritual renewal.

Next, the call to the community is realized in the faithful witness of the church through youth peer counseling, gang intervention groups, and community awareness. The church then becomes a youth center that is open daily to meet the needs of youth who are exposed to the threats and influence of gang pressure. The church becomes a youth development center teaching values that come from the Word and not from the street. Skills for future employment and positive role modeling are necessary programs. They will build the proper vision and outlook in our youth.

Finally, the prophetic responsibility of the church necessitates a program that is redemptive toward gang members. If we would co-opt with community and government resources to help rehabilitate gang members, success would be realized. This kind of program is designed to restore hope and self-worth to members who are willing to consider alternatives to a life of crime and violence.

As we develop programs for action, our success will be realized as we continually see the heavenly vision of the

Lamb standing on the mount of Sion, in control of all by creation and redemption. Our worship will be, "worthy, worthy is the Lamb that was slain" (Rev. 5:9).

Chapter 9

Conclusion

The book of Revelation is a unique book of the Bible that is so widely misunderstood, and is seldom preached. However, I believe that it is important to develop sound hermeneutics for interpreting this and any other book of the Bible. This will guard against the many wild interpretations that have caused so many to turn away from using the book in preaching, worship, and other areas of ministry. An effort should be made also to understand what the symbols and imagery meant to John and his first century reader before attempting to plot a direction for contemporary application.

A study of its literary form will gain great insight as to the meaning and application of the book. With so many areas where the human family is under attack I believe that hope, inspiration, and courage can be gleaned from its pages. When a person sees how God has worked over the centuries, in behalf of His people, they will be able to forge ahead in faith knowing that God is on their side.

Revelation not only has its themes of comfort and hope, but also themes of protest. Its call for moral purity summon all to look at their own lives and challenge their personal beliefs and practices with the life and work of

Jesus Christ. If injustice is found, on behalf of those who cannot free themselves from their own circumstances, you should do all you can to help the situation. Corruption in government, church, and self should always be discouraged.

The pulpit is the central forum for Christian communication, and preaching from the book of Revelation will give the preacher a wealth of material for calling the congregation into social and moral action. Programs will be developed that will embrace the eschatological hope of a soon coming Savior. These programs will be designed to counter the influences of evil that have enslaved the minds and lives of so many.

Within the worship of the church, preaching from the book of Revelation will transform the service. The examples of worship in heaven will act to energize the worshippers with the freedom to express their love for God in a corporate setting. The praise of God is contagious and the results are amazing.

I sight several reasons why preaching from the book of Revelation is essential in our churches today: first, to build a foundation for hope and assurance; second, to challenge each member to high spiritual reform; third, to identify evil in all of its forms and warn men and women of its perils; fourth, to challenge the preacher's own beliefs

and values; fifth, to develop a theology for last-day events so that you can give a biblical response to the current events that arise on a daily basis; and lastly, to enrich the preacher's personal, professional and spiritual life with deep, thought-provoking material for research and biblical exegesis.

The book of Revelation speaks volumes to the condition of humanity. It is a book that should attract more interest as the hours of earth's history wind down.

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